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Papa's Got A Brand New (Virtual) Bag: Real-Time Chat and Reference Discourse

Darren Chase

Abstract

Many librarians agree that virtual reference has expanded the range of library reference services. Along with an expansion of reference service, virtual reference (especially real-time chat) has influenced reference discourse. Style characteristics of chat include its telegraphic brevity, its conversational and informal tone, and its tendency towards interview and exchange. A bedrock feature of traditional reference service is the reference interview-as this and other aspects of reference exchange are conversational, chat is exceptionally resonant within the continuum of reference services. The virtual reference librarian operates in a medium both familiar and leading-edge (a bridge between the traditional and the innovative), and through which reference services advance into territories governed by emerging technologies and unexpected models of discourse.

Introduction

To many professionals, virtual reference represents the confluence of emerging technology and traditional service, and (depending on how dogmatically attached to one or the other one may be) is regarded as a bane that contributes to the overall degradation of the profession, or as the best thing to happen to reference service since the telephone. Its arguable strengths and weakness as a reference tool aside, real-time virtual reference is resonant with the traditional reference interview model, which is characterized by conversational query and exchange. Because of this resonance, virtual reference is a dynamic conduit linking experienced reference librarians to emerging technologies in unexpected yet useful ways.

New technology/Traditional paradigm

It may be axiomatic to regard virtual reference as a useful tool-among an array of tools used for connecting users with their information needs. Yet the case for virtual reference remains undecided, and many librarians regarded virtual reference with a cold, wary eye.

“The library world has been far too gullible, far too willing to regard any technical advance as a service advance, too eager to insist that whatever the new technology may be, it will inevitably provide better, more convenient, more effective service for our patrons. Half the time we have been wrong about the supposed value of these various technologies and the rest of the time only half right” (Lauer).

Traditional reference service is framed by the reference interview. The effectiveness of the interview in assisting a user is entirely dependent upon the ability of the user and the librarian to understand one another, the knowledge-set of the librarian, and the availability of relevant resources. The reference interview is an appreciably transparent vehicle moving the query/answer paradigm with diligence and thrift. Elemental to its success is the naturalness of the reference interview, its familiarity to both the user and the librarian as essentially conversation-guided though it inevitable is.

Though other technological “advances” (such as online request forms) may muddy this exchange, real-time chat is, definitively, a continuation of conversation. Because of its straightforward informality, chat is ideal for online users, who seek useful information and are unconcerned with forms, procedures, models, and ways and means. Yet, haunting this virtual chat space is a manner of discourse that is remarkable in its sublime unsophistication.

User = lowest common denominator

Serving the user means serving a public with a broad range of manners, skill and comprehension level. Bad manners aside, developing a system of service that accommodates the lowest common denominator (LCM) is a logical base for reference service. Chat is remarkably viable in reaching the entire range, from the LCM to the handful of users who may have a reasonable understanding of a libraries’ resources and services. Chat’s provenance within a rapidly evolving technology that is lockstep with the popularity-and revolutionary expansion-of digital information, make it an important link between the user, the librarian and the resources. Like the traditional reference interview, chat is a platform for librarian skills and professional service. The expertise of librarians is the engine driving virtual reference, and their collaborative nature that succeeds in mapping the destination.

However, the ways in which it is unlike conversation are equally essential to its value within the reference exchange. Unlike a conversation, chat provides a text response—a transcript or an email with answers, embedded links, bibliographies, screen shots, etc.—in this way it’s like the rare toy that comes fully assembled, batteries included. In addition, chat is anonymous, which relieves the anxiety that many users feel in face-to-face interactions. Chat creates freedom from the assumptions and prejudices of appearance. This anonymity also makes it easy (for users and librarians) to do research that might be embarrassing.

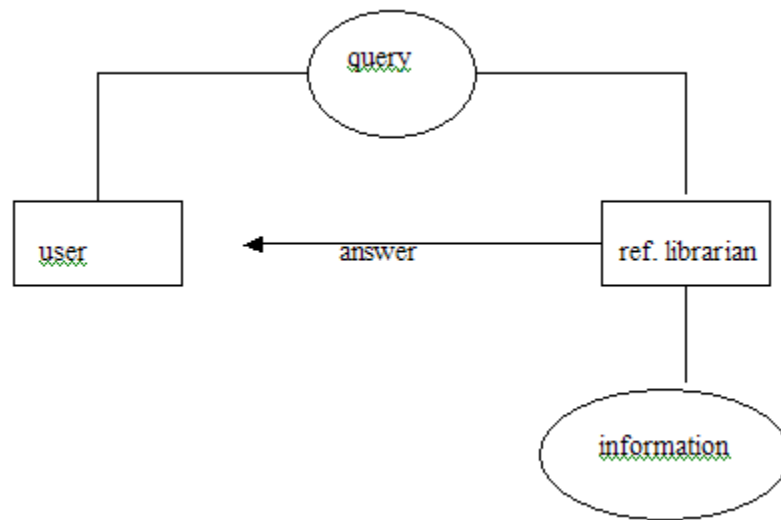


Figure 1. Traditional Reference Model

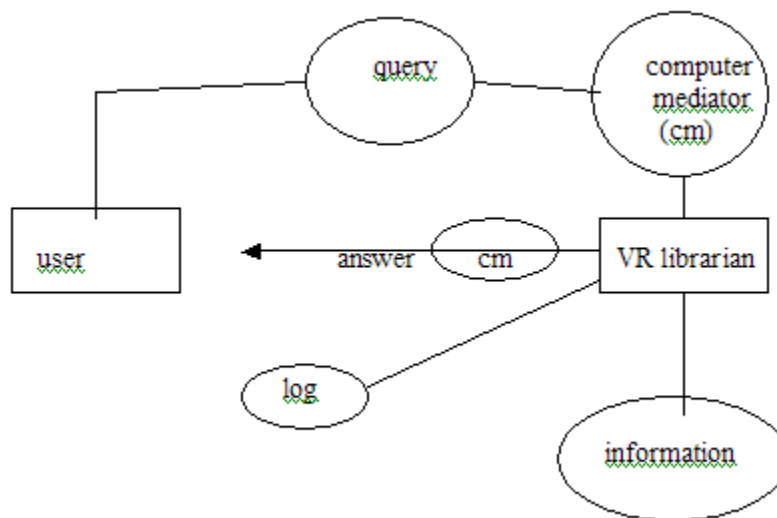


Figure 2. Virtual Reference Model

As figure 1 and figure 2 illustrate, traditional and virtual reference models follow similar circuits. This similarity aids in creating in virtual reference a friendly and

familiar platform of exchange for both users and librarians, while introducing revolutionary new elements into the paradigm that advances the service while connecting remote users to heretofore-unobtainable resources.

What the models represented by figures 1 and 2 fail to show are unquantifiable things like frustration, sympathy, and-as is especially the case with virtual reference-lag time. The silence of real-time chat can be deafening. Users waiting for a response from a long-absent librarian may feel as if their ears and mouth were stuffed with etherized cotton. At least telephones have ‘hold’—telephone muzak can be annoying but at least delivers a sense of suspension that indicates freedom to do other things while waiting.

The absence of the human element in virtual reference means users may find it difficult to develop a synergistic rapport with a librarian-which can be crucial to fruitful communication.

New discourse

A challenging part of a successful reference interview is being able to tease the answer out of a difficult and obscure question. This obscurity usually comes from the inability of the user to clearly state or even understand what information they need. In addition, research instruction succeeds when a feedback loop from user to librarian and back is established. Reference librarians know to not only guide users to resources, but to evaluate user’s search results and offer suggestions and guidance while moving with the user from resource to resource. The platform of this knowledge is conversation.

Chat discourse melds successfully within this exchange paradigm because it is conversational. Chat’s informality, however, can be extremely loose, and requires the librarian to establish a professional tone even while using a conversational medium. Carter notes:

Language used in chat rooms is often delightfully informal-long and/or common words are abbreviated (e.g., gr8 = great), capitalization is often foregone, and complete strangers are addressed as bosom buddies. While many of our patrons may employ such standard chat conventions, we should avoid employing them ourselves. Without the artifice of a building around us, a position at a desk, the clothes we wear, etc., the only thing we have to present our authority are the words we use. Thus, it is imperative that we not come across as just another buddy, but rather as the official face of the institution (library) that we represent.

During the virtual reference interview, user and librarian move through a range of research tasks, including gathering resources, database instruction and search

demonstration, and evaluation of search results and resources. This movement is enhanced by the chat transcript, while being accelerated by the brevity of the discourse.

In effect, the virtual interview can lead to more effective researching, as it forces all participants to engage in a discourse that is both conversational and textual. Chat requires user and librarian to mediate and textualize their conversation, trimming the fat and excess and homing in on the essence of both the query and response.

However, with online technology's rapid ascendancy and remarkable cultural currency (as personified by Google), it has developed a nearly-supernatural aura among the young and the uninformed to regard 'the map as the territory' as it were, effectively obscuring the utility of virtual reference under a haze of what can be termed 'Google-awe'-these are the users who don't understand that virtual reference is a librarian's tool, instead believing it (along with Google) takes the place of libraries and librarians. This is akin to believing that the technology itself created the information.

The bedrock significance of individual librarians and users effectively communicating is often obscured by the abstract recognition that libraries-as institutions-enrich communities and individuals, and that virtual reference is an opportunity for dynamically advancing user knowledge and user appreciation for library services and resources.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be fairly noted that virtual reference is unambiguously valuable-an exceptional platform for extending the reach of librarian/user exchange. Chat's strengths outweigh its weaknesses, while improvements in technology will resolve many of those weaknesses. Ultimately it should be recognized by both users and librarians that experience with virtual reference leads to an understanding that the digital information age has transformed the collection, transmission and sharing of knowledge, and in doing so, begun to establish new roles and expectations for the 21st century library.

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